

Piers Merchant (1951-2009)

Piers Merchant was my MP for six years. He died September 21, 2009, and like most of the rest of the world I learned of his death three days later, from a London freesheet on my way home from the British Library. I was saddened and sickened in equal measure to read this and other obituaries which referred to him as a sleaze merchant and as a or *the* sex scandal MP. When George Best died he was hailed as a soccer legend, one of the all time greats, etc, rather than the long term alcoholic and serial womaniser that were his main occupations. It is a sad fact though that while some people can do no wrong in the eyes of the media, others are remembered only for one error of judgment or a single unfortunate act, sordid or otherwise.

I didn't know Piers Merchant very well, I met him perhaps half a dozen times, once at a Libertarian Alliance conference, another time when I interviewed him in some depth, and a few times when I ran into him on the train to or from Penge East, and once on the Victoria Line at Victoria Station.

Long before the so-called scandal over his personal life, Piers found himself on the receiving end of a potentially far more damaging smear, and unlike his later affair/*ménage à trois* or whatever it was claimed to be, this smear had absolutely no basis in fact, emanating as it did from the pre-eminent smear merchants in the field. The interview below is published for the first time. This is one tiny part of the vast research I and my colleague Mark Taha undertook on Gerry Gable and his odious Searchlight Organisation. We had been working our way through back issues of *Searchlight*, and when I found the smears on Piers I wrote to him at the House of Commons.

In addition to this interview he obtained for me – on two occasions – documents that I used in my researches into both Searchlight and an unrelated matter. One of these documents I believe was in his possession, the other he obtained from an official source. Apart from this, I have a far more personal reason to be grateful to my conscientious MP.

This interview was provisionally entitled *Chinese Whispers - The Case Of Piers Merchant*, and is one of several pieces of research related to Searchlight that has yet to see the light of day. It was originally to be part nine of a monograph, but the evolution of the Internet has led to the abandonment of this publication in hard copy, although other parts have already been published by virtue of their incorporation into the SearchlightArchive website in one form or another. The last time I edited this particular piece was October 2001.

I knew that after his resignation, Piers had landed on his feet and secured some sort of position in the City, but I had no idea he had re-entered politics. He was never a radical, nor was he destined for high office, and as far as I know he never entertained ambitions for it, although he would certainly have made a good minister. He was simply one industrious, sincere and genuine MP who did his best for his constituents, and for the greater good. I remember him as a genuinely nice guy, and in time I am sure this is how he will be remembered when the lurid headlines relating to his personal life have been long forgotten.

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Piers Merchant Interview Re “Searchlight” Smears

In its August 1983 issue, *Searchlight* ran a small article on alleged links of the then newly elected Conservative MP for Newcastle Central, Piers Merchant, with a party of the “far right”. (1) Merchant, who is now Conservative MP for Beckenham - my MP as it happens (2) - was said to have acted as an agent for the National Democratic Party candidate in Nottingham in 1970. The allegation was repeated two years later in the November 1985 issue. (3) Two pieces of evidence were said to have supported this claim. One, an alleged NDP election leaflet bearing Merchant's name which had, conveniently, disappeared from Nottingham public library; and a declaration from the Nottingham Returning Officer, which was said to have appeared in a local newspaper after the election. Merchant did indeed at one time live in Nottingham. Needless to say, he tells a different story. And chronology is on his side. I interviewed Piers Merchant at the House of Commons on November 1, 1993. Here is what he had to say.

Merchant: It's total fabrication. However, my initial reaction was so what? Big deal! I would always defend somebody's right to hold a particular set of views and change them, particularly at that sort of age, as would any reasonable person. (4) It struck me as an extraordinary thing to try to turn this sort of claim into a story, but in my case it was totally fictitious and very easily proven fictitious because the core fault in the fabrication is that I was doing something in Nottingham in 1970. In 1970 I was actually not in Nottingham but at University in Durham. The whole attempt collapses as a result. I did once live in Nottingham, but that was in the early part of 1969, so their chronology was way off.

Question: But what about the “election address” ?

Merchant: This is a very interesting business; they claim there was an election address for a “National Democratic Party” candidate in Nottingham in 1970, but this election address was never produced. It didn't exist. They never could produce a copy. Nobody could. At one stage, somebody in Newcastle produced a leaflet purporting to include a copy of an address, but it looked highly forged; it actually looked like a copy of an election address that had then had my name typed on the bottom! No original was ever produced; they then claimed that it was in the public library, but the public library had no record of it because I checked. Then the people spreading this smear claimed it had it just disappeared, no doubt so that they could say that it had been there but that it didn't exist any longer.

This has all the hallmarks of a bizarre right wing conspiracy theory of the sort we have come to expect from Mr Gable over the years. And, although this forgery didn't in the first instance rear its ugly head in *Searchlight*, it also has all the hallmarks of Gable's hidden hand. His - and the magazine's - “research” is so sloppy it is legendary. Their chronology is often wrong - as it is here - their allegations are nebulous; the documentation they produce is highly suspicious, and, last but by no means least, they attack someone whose fascist credentials are every bit as convincing as the Pope's atheist credentials. Merchant is - I am sure he will forgive me from saying - so absolutely squeaky clean that the charge is ludicrous.

Born and raised in Nottingham, he graduated from Durham with a BA joint honours in Law and Politics and an MA in Political Philosophy. He led an active student career, including editor of the student newspaper. He was also President (senior man) of his college and held a wide number of other elected offices. He stood as Conservative candidate in Newcastle-upon-Tyne Central in 1979 when he polled 2,932 votes to the Labour candidate's 10,395.

Of the incriminating document - the alleged memorandum - which is partially reproduced in the November 1985 issue of *Searchlight*, he says: "It doesn't look at all authentic". As indeed, it doesn't.

Merchant: At that time, when this was allegedly done, in 1970, I was living in Durham, and I can absolutely prove that because I have a note from the University to that effect. This letter is absolutely watertight, and anyone who doubts it can check with the University.

Merchant explained that at that time a student couldn't leave Durham University then, even for a day, without a signed piece of paper from a tutor, called an *exeat*. Later he sent me a batch of documents testifying to this effect. He had obviously been worried by this smear - for the reason people often worry about allegations which have absolutely no basis in fact, however trivial - and had equally obviously made considerable efforts to pin it down. In retrospect this may have been his supreme good fortune, because he was later to share an office with Gerald Howarth.

Returning to the 1983 election campaign, Merchant explained that Nigel Todd the Labour candidate, was on the far left of the Labour Party; he was deserted by a large section of the Labour Party in Newcastle who refused to have anything to do with his campaign. Todd immediately jumped on the smear and tried to blow it up into something big. "I think he was in some way involved. I challenged Todd to produce the documents. He couldn't." This could be true, on the other hand, Todd could have been set up. Over the years, *Searchlight* has set up the police, various journalists and other parties to do the dirty work for their scams. (5)

Merchant did some research on the National Democratic Party and found out that it was launched by Desmond Donnelly, sometimes called the Democratic Party; there was also an anti-immigration National Democratic Party. This one involved Air-Vice Marshall Don Bennett, who was right wing, but not in any sense National Front style. He had commanded the Pathfinders in the last war fighting Nazism. Gerry Gable, take note.

Merchant: I believe one of its reasons for existence was as an alternative for right wingers who did not want to join the National Front. It was Powellite, and, in fact, it denounced the National Front as too extreme. It was also one of the first groups to condemn the NF for having ex-Nazi sympathisers in its leadership.

This is indicative both of Gable's sloppy research and his well attested habit of branding anyone who doesn't subscribe to his particular brand of "racial tolerance" - ie forced race-mixing - as "Nazi". And, of course, anyone who doesn't like him personally as anti-Semitic.

Merchant became a journalist, working for the *Newcastle Journal*. A member of the NUJ, he was elected Father of Chapel of the Newcastle Branch in 1978 and 1980. He has always been a Conservative, but has never been on the extreme right of the party. The first time this story came to his attention was May 1983, three months before the *Searchlight* article, so it is tempting to believe that this is something *Searchlight* picked up on. This would be to do Mr Gable a great disservice; he is a past master at laying false trails. The allegation was timed conveniently, to coincide exactly with the 1983 General Election campaign; Merchant was fighting a very marginal seat at the time, Newcastle Central.

Merchant: I went to a public meeting in the first or second week of the campaign and somebody jumped up and said: "I understand you were a Parliamentary election agent for the

National Front in 1974.” I was completely taken aback by this; I stood up and said I didn't know what he was talking about. I was a journalist at the time in fact as I was in 1974.

On the *Newcastle Journal*, as stated. The man pressed the point but then it sort of died away. It would have been more than a little obvious if Merchant had been both a journalist and openly associated with the National Front in any way, manner, shape or form. The NUJ has been in the forefront of the “political correctness” campaign; recently it issued a publication on “guidelines” for reporting AIDS which amounts to overt censorship similar to its “guidelines” on reporting race issues.

The reference to his having supposedly been an election agent for the National Front was something which grew in the retelling. Later, he was supposed to have been an NF Parliamentary candidate. A claim that is easily refuted by consulting the appropriate volume of Craig. (6)

At the same time as the smear on him, a similar story emerged concerning Tom Finnegan who stood as the Conservative candidate in the next marginal seat of Stockton South. (7) This was substantiated. Merchant's reaction was that his accuser had been confused with Finnegan, but towards the end of the campaign the smear on Merchant himself was taken up locally, and a leaflet based on it was produced by *Newcastle University Students Against Racism*. This was disseminated around the university and around the constituency as well. This is actually blatantly illegal. (8)

According to Merchant, people were so disgusted with the depths to which his detractors had sunk that there was a backlash and he won the election in this highly marginal seat. Mr Gable would no doubt put this down to the endemic *racism* of the electorate.

At university, Merchant was heavily involved in Conservative politics, in the course of which he took part in many debates including one in which he met and debated with Air-Vice Marshall Don Bennett of the NDP, but, as already stated, knew nothing about him except that he had a very prestigious war record. None of the other names listed meant anything to him. He hadn't even heard of the NDP.

Searchlight renders this thus “...former NDP Midlands organiser Jim Gibson told reporters that Merchant had spoken at an NDP meeting in Nottingham in the same year, [1971] alongside the veteran patron of far-right causes, Air-Vice Marshal Don 'Pathfinder' Bennett.” (9)

Merchant rightly says that this sort of guilt by association smear puts one at a great disadvantage.

Merchant: If someone accuses you of something that isn't in your memory and which happened a long time ago, your first reaction is obviously to deny it. But of course, we can't keep track of or remember everyone we meet, nor be aware of their politics. An election agent type smear is easier to refute, but vague allegations of the *links with* type are not easy either to refute or to deal with. Now I debated with Tony Benn many years ago. I dare say he doesn't remember that, but I do. That doesn't make me a Benn-ite. Or for that matter Benn a Merchant-ite!

The Nottingham address given is for Merchant's parents, who still live at the same address. But so what? His parents are, he says, totally non-political and have never been involved with

any political party of any sort at any time in their lives.

Another thing Merchant has been accused of, though not by Gable, is having *links* with the Security Services. He denies any connection. He has met Special Branch and/or other security men in the course of political meetings, but this is par for the course. When politicians attend debates and public meetings - especially government ministers - there are often "secret police" present. Since Merchant first became an MP in 1983 he has, unquestionably, rubbed shoulders with dozens, if not hundreds, of these supposedly so mysterious individuals. On one occasion at university he was, he says, grilled in a mild manner by a Special Branch or other Secret State officer. He repeated this anecdote to an *Observer* journalist some years later, and, out of a substantial interview, a single paragraph claiming that he had worked for the Security Services, found its way into print. "I can't remember the exact date but it was 1985 or 1986."

One final point, Merchant says he was also investigated by the *Panorama* team who produced the infamous *Maggie's Militant Tendency* documentary. But they decided to leave him out because their research could not validate Gable's stories.

Notes And References

- (1) *Labour demands enquiry into Newcastle Tory*, August 1983, issue 98, page 6.
- (2) I didn't actually realise this until he pointed it out to me. I thought my MP was Sir Philip Goodhardt, but he has apparently retired. I first met Merchant when he gave a speech at a Libertarian Alliance conference in his capacity as Public Affairs Director of the Advertising Association.
- (3) *NEW ALLEGATIONS OVER MP's EXTREMIST LINKS*, published in *Searchlight*, November 1985, issue 125, page 3.
- (4) It should be borne in mind here that George Orwell, author of the world famous satire on the "Russian" Revolution, *Animal Farm*, was once a communist. And, as readers of our other publications will be aware, Mrs Sonia Gable née Hochfelder, has had an extremely bizarre political career! [See in particular *Searchlight On A Searchliar...* and *Editors! Are You Being Fed A Load Of Bullshit...*, both published by Anglo-Hebrew Publishing, London, (1993)].
- (5) For example, the gullible *Telegraph* journalist the late Peter Gladstone Smith whom they fed their Column 88 Nazi underground nonsense.
- (6) A series of books on Parliamentary election results, compiled by F.W.S. Craig.
- (7) This was reported in the same issue and on the same page of *Searchlight*.
- (8) On November 4, 1975, the *Times*, page 7, reported a court case involving two men who had been distributing anti-National Front leaflets in the run-up to the General Election: Director of Public Prosecutions v Luft and Another. Mike Luft is one of the "Jewish anti-fascists" associated with *Searchlight* who do so much to create ill-feeling towards their race. Mr Another aka Graeme Atkinson is the office *goy*. He is currently the magazine's European editor.
- (9) *Searchlight*, November 1985, page 3.